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SUBJECT: SYRIA NOMINATES SISTER CLAUDA ISAIAH NADDAF FOR
THE SECRETARY'S INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE AWARD

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00479

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 00471

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 00448

[1](#)D. DAMASCUS 00139

[1](#)E. DAMASCUS 00062

[1](#)1. Summary: The U.S. Embassy in Damascus is honored to nominate Sister Claudia Isaiah Naddaf (a.k.a. Sister Marie-Claude) for the Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award. Working arduously and quietly in the murky "no-man's land" between civil society activists and the Syrian Arab Republic government (SARG), Sister Marie-Claude Naddaf has championed the safety of women and young girls in Syria-- whether they be victims of domestic violence, trafficking, economically driven prostitution, or refugees -- since assuming the position of Mother Superior of the Good Shepherd Convent in Damascus. By educating an indifferent government, facing down the political sensitivities and cultural taboos, reaching out to local and international NGOs, and training a cadre of religious and secular women activists, Sister Marie-Claude led the vanguard in establishing the first of every kind of women's assistance program in Syria, and paved the way for other successful programs by such groups as the International Organization for Migration. She has had a direct, life-changing impact on thousands of women in Syria. Reftels directly or indirectly speak to the works of Sister Marie-Claude and her convent. End Summary.

[1](#)2. Background: When Claudia Isaiah Naddaf assumed the role of Mother Superior at the Good Shepherd Convent in Damascus, Syria, in 1994, she could not have known she would be the catalyst for a paradigm shift in the public's and SARG's thinking about assisting women-in-need. Or that she would successfully chip away at the code of silence surrounding women and girls who have suffered sexual exploitation. The Syria of 1994 offered no social services for women seeking social, psychological, or legal assistance after suffering domestic violence, homelessness, or trafficking -- Syrian nationals or otherwise. Women trafficked into prostitution were imprisoned for months on end with criminals until they could be deported. Sister Marie-Claude set out to create a range of services for women through her Damascus Convent that included the equally formidable task of confronting a society and government loath to acknowledge that violence against women existed and even more reluctant to interfere in family affairs.

[1](#)3. After convincing SARG officials that a women's shelter was an imperative, Sister Marie-Claude and the convent opened Syria's first women's shelter in 1996. The shelter continues to host women of all nationalities; since the war in Iraq, however, its beds have been filled with women and children trafficked into Syria for sexual exploitation. Known as the "Oasis shelter," the convent's work raised consciousness among international and local NGOs, and created an important precedent of government cooperation that has since led to the opening of a dedicated victims of domestic violence shelter

as well as a trafficking-in-persons shelter. The domestic violence shelter even borrowed its name directly from the convent, calling itself "Oasis of Hope." Her consciousness raising efforts have increasingly engaged the SARG, helping prepare the way for two ministerial meetings with the Embassy on TIP issues.

¶4. Sister Marie-Claude continued to press the SARG to expand her access to women-in-need and eventually won access to female prisoners at the Douma Women's Prison in Damascus. It is a sad fact in Syria that many women are forced to raise their children in prison. Sister Marie-Claude established a special nursery in the prison to take care of children. She also began a vocational education program in the prison to eliminate illiteracy and provide training for skills that will assist their reintegration into society. Along the way, Sister Marie-Claude has trained a dozens of committed nuns and civil society activists in shelter administration, outreach, education programming, and more.

¶5. This capacity building enabled her to start the country's first ever women's telephone hotline, which is attached to a new emergency shelter where women can get legal advice, psychological counseling, and temporary shelter 24 hours a day. Additionally, Sister Marie-Claude navigated the treacherous political waters of the Ministry of the Interior and security services and won an agreement allowing her to refer women in police custody to shelters if she or her staff deemed the women to be victims of trafficking. In 2009, her initiative led to the release of over 20 South Asian women -- all of whom were trafficked domestic workers -- from Douma prison into the custody of the dedicated shelter for trafficked women.

¶6. Operating with approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the face of stiff SARG resistance, Sister Marie-Claude has endured extra scrutiny from Syrian security services for her cooperation with the U.S. Embassy to ensure her staff had access to adequate funding and training. Her willingness to work with us, however, did not diminish the passion of her strong belief that the war in Iraq had cursed a generation of women and generated a compelling need for a broad humanitarian response.

¶7. A visit with Sister Marie-Claude is never an everyday affair. She sits you down, unveils her vision for assisting women in need, explains the moral framework in which she operates, engages you in a discussion on how we, united, might begin to alleviate suffering, and then you meet the very women and girls to whom she has devoted herself. It is a powerful experience. Her boundless energy, fiery intelligence, and tremendous courage have won the respect of SARG officials, diplomats, and NGOs alike. She has stood firm in the face of political indifference and kicked down the doors of cultural constraint to better (and very often save) the lives of women and young girls who have found themselves abandoned, beaten, on the street, or slaves to traffickers.

¶8. Sister Marie-Claude was notified of the nomination and informed Post she would be able to accept the award.

¶9. BIO DATA: Name: Claudia Isaiah Naddaf; DOB: 01/01/1944; POB: Tartous Khrebat, Syria; Title: Mother Superior of the Good Shepherd Convent in Damascus, Syria; Address: Good Shepherd Sisters, Bab Touma, PO Box 22217, Damascus, Syria; Tel: 00963-11-5443527; E-mail: mcnaddaf@hotmail.com; Citizenship: Syrian; PPT#: 004543074; Languages: Arabic (5/5), French (4/4), English (2/2, roughly).

¶10. POC: Post Contact for the nomination is Anthony Deaton, Pol/Econ Section; e-mail: DeatonAA@state.gov; Tel: 00963-3391-3207 (w), 00963-947-696-676 (m).
GOODFRIEND